

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

Staff
Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners
Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Natasha Sierra

Meeting Minutes
January 28, 2021
Via GoTo Meeting Webinar
Online Video Platform
04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:18 pm.

Attending: FHC members Claudia DeAndrade, Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman and Natasha Sierra; City staff, Bryant Gaspard.

Minute distribution (upon acceptance) to: FHC members and others attending; also posted to City website.

I. Standing Agenda Items

Meeting Minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes from the December 17, 2020 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Rona Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Patrice Faulkner and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: One of the Facebook posts that Dennis discussed was the question of the week-- is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) a valid reason for a tenant to break their lease? The answer is dependent on the housing situation of the tenant. The question was derived from a Los Angeles Times article where a landlord discussed the housing situation of his tenant who has PTSD. In the article the tenant is a veteran whose PTSD is triggered by the proximity of railroad tracks and the highway to where he lives. In this case the landlord would likely have to grant the tenant's request to break the lease early based on his PTSD.

The second post was a cautionary message to home sellers and listing agents. The post explained that when a seller's agent asks about a buyer it should be about the transaction or the material concerns about the home. The seller's agent should avoid asking the buyer any questions if it is outside the terms/conditions of the transaction.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no housing discrimination complaints received in January.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant informed the Commission that he communicated with a local group called the “Know Your Rights Coalition” regarding conducting a Fair Housing presentation in February. Bryant thought the presentation was a good idea to further inform Somerville residents about fair housing law and resources. Rona agreed to also speak at the fair housing presentation based on her experience in real estate. Dennis also agreed that the fair housing presentation would be a good idea and it should be recorded to re-purpose for Fair Housing month in April. He added that dubbing the video would allow the presentation to be accessible to households that are Limited English Proficient (LEP). Patrice and Natasha agreed with Dennis and offered to attend the event as well.

Bryant informed the Commissioners that the Somerville City Council Land Use Committee recently met to discuss the City of Boston incorporating fair housing and displacement concerns in their zoning code. Boston City Councilor Kenzie Bok spoke to the Land Use Committee on why they wanted to incorporate fair housing, specifically Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH), issues of displacement and historical exclusion in the zoning code. She discussed how developers seeking to build residential properties in Boston would need to address what actions they would take to combat displacement and address the AFFH. Developers would need to provide a list of interventions they would do such as providing extra affordable units, family units (three bedrooms or more) or provide a preference to voucher holders.

Rona inquired if a video link of the Land Use Committee meeting could be shared with the Commission. Bryant indicated that when the video is available he would share it with all the Commissioners. Rona added that it would not be helpful if only Boston changes its Zoning code to address displacement and fair housing. Hopefully, other towns/cities examine the same issue and adopt zoning changes that are appropriate for their residents and community. Patrice was curious regarding the amount of displacement that may occur or be prevented from Boston changing its zoning code.

Bryant asked the Commissioners to brainstorm fair housing ideas and initiatives that they wanted to work on in 2021. Rona suggested that we draft a press release every so often updating the public on the work the Commission is doing in regard to fair housing. Bryant shared that increased advertising of the Commission will be needed and that posting on electrical signs such as “Soofa Talk” would be a good step. Dennis added that the advertisements on “Soofa Talk” should be short and catchy and he would be willing to draft one. Patrice suggested that we also ask candidates running for political office about fair housing and their view point on it. She believed it would be a great way to see and hear what the candidates position is and for them to listen to the needs of their constituents.

III. Announcements

Rona reiterated that the tenant handbook that she worked on to update is on the Fair Housing Commission website.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis Fischman and seconded by Natasha Sierra and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:12 pm.